

Make it in America: What's Next?
October 28, 2015
Remarks from Rep. Dan Kildee (D-MI05)

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today; this is a very important issue that deserves our attention.

America faces a number of urgent challenges that should be addressed immediately. We should be taking up legislation that makes a significant and long-term investment in our crumbling infrastructure. Congress's failure to focus on meaningful investment in our cities – and infrastructure everywhere - only exacerbates the problem and increases costs every month.

It is entirely within our power to build a twenty-first century infrastructure. We all say we are for it, but Congress must act to make it happen.

The failure to focus on our nation's aging infrastructure can be seen in my district. Right now, my hometown of Flint, Michigan, is going through a crisis. In the twenty-first century, my hometown cannot guarantee clean, safe drinking water to its residents – in the wealthiest nation on Earth. That is shameful.

Aging water infrastructure has led to lead leaching into the city's water supply at dangerous and unsafe levels. It is a public health crisis leading to serious health concerns for my constituents. And now, potentially hundreds of millions of dollars in damage have been done to the city's already aging infrastructure.

It is a failure of government at every level. The state of Michigan has consistently cut revenue sharing to the city of Flint to the tune of tens of millions of dollars, and then places the city in receivership for being fiscally insolvent. The state also has had the responsibility of ensuring water quality, but made decisions for Flint that compromised its water

system in ways will have consequences for decades. The federal government also bears some responsibilities, as it did not act to ensure that federal safe water drinking laws were enforced.

For months, state officials assured Flint residents that the water was fine, that it was safe to drink, despite independent research by health and water experts saying it was not.

For months, both state and federal officials at the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency refused to admit there was a problem. One state official said that the people in Flint should just “relax.” Meanwhile, the children and residents of Flint were being exposed to dangerous levels of lead that could cause permanent and irreparable harm.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that government has failed Flint.

In recent years, Flint has been under state receivership, and an emergency financial manager, appointed by Republican Governor Rick Snyder, came in to ‘fix’ the city’s problems.

It was the decision of one of these emergency managers that lead to the water crisis in Flint. A decision that merely looked at a short-term balance sheet, made purely to save money, without any serious inquiry into or consideration of the health effects it would have on the citizens of Flint.

Sadly, this is not a victimless crime. The people of Flint are the victims of this failure of government, both in the immediate sense, but also in the long term.

The example of Flint is a stark reminder that we cannot simply “manage” our struggling cities out of the downward spiral of decline and disinvestment. Older industrial cities like Flint reflect decades of stagnant or declining job opportunities, weak housing markets, declining

populations, decaying infrastructure – problems that cannot be fixed in a few months or even a few years.

The reason for the decline of these cities is multifaceted, and cannot be simply and conveniently attributed to failed local leadership. There are many contributing factors: development patterns supported by federal and state governments that resulted in a dramatically reduced tax base, outsourced jobs through failed trade policies, a weakened housing market due to years of unchecked blight and decline, and a lack of a coherent urban strategy at the federal or state level.

Congress needs to focus on these legacy cities. This subset of American cities, like my hometown of Flint, helped to build the American middle class. In my district's case, it was the birthplace of General Motors, and helped to put the world on wheels.

These communities are now struggling, many are in financial hardship, and Congress needs to act to invest in them. Our approach must be comprehensive and certainly include economic reinvestment, but also include housing policy, job training, tax policy, community redevelopment and infrastructure investment.

We need to remember that folks in Flint; in Detroit; in Camden, New Jersey; in Youngstown, Ohio; in our struggling cities across the country – they pay federal and state taxes. They are citizens too, and deserve to have a chance to succeed in our economy.

We cannot leave cities like my hometown of Flint behind. The success or failure of cities like Flint and the people who live in those places should be a concern of all Americans, and Congress cannot sit idly by and claim it bears no obligation to do anything to rebuild the great legacy cities.

The time to act is now.